



When it comes to customer experience, bigger is not always better

The “Boutique Experience”

When it comes to customer experience, bigger is not always better. The “Boutique Experience” is what customers want. Today’s buzzword in the corporate world is Customer Experience. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has been replaced by Customer Experience Management (CEM), which is defined by Wikipedia as “the processes and methods used to design and manage a customer’s entire experience with a product or a company.” Companies have even gone so far as to hire Customer Experience Managers, responsible for ensuring every customer experience is not only positive but also helps to increase customer retention and loyalty. Granted, technology has commoditized many of the products and services available on the market, and companies today are more challenged to differentiate their offerings. However, this “new” attention on customer experience makes one wonder: Why is it so hard to provide a positive customer experience? More important, when did companies stop delivering good experiences? The answer is simple – when they got too big. Once a business reaches a certain size, it’s hard to continue to deliver the “Boutique Experience.” While there are exceptions to every rule – think Southwest Airlines, Nordstrom’s, Cadillac – they are just that, exceptions. By definition, a boutique is “any small, exclusive business offering customized service.” But providing a Boutique Experience requires more than being small in size or offering a customized service. It requires dedication, focus and commitment to the customer. Companies that successfully deliver a “Boutique Experience” to each and every customer reap the rewards of a more loyal customer base that is more likely to serve as an advocate of their business. Let’s take a look at the key characteristics that differentiate Boutique Experience providers from the masses.

Accountability

As a customer, there is nothing more frustrating than being passed off from one person to the next when trying to resolve a problem – unless, of course, it’s being told no one can help you. However, when a company takes responsibility for its actions, it is much easier to forgive and forget. In fact, you might even tell others about the positive experience you had.

Take JetBlue for example. By acknowledging its recent mistake involving flight delays, apologizing to its customers and offering restitution, the airline received praise from the media and increased its chances of rebounding from an otherwise disastrous event. Blessed with no corporate hierarchy, smaller, boutique companies tend to be more accountable for their actions as they recognize what’s at stake – the loss of a customer.

Accessibility

Which is the more positive experience – punching five different buttons before reaching a live voice, leaving a voice mail that rarely gets returned or speaking to a real person immediately? It's not rocket science. In a world where outsourced call centers are becoming more prevalent, talking to someone who can actually answer your question or resolve your issue is becoming harder and harder. Boutique environments understand that being accessible is important to customer satisfaction, which is why they make sure there is always someone within the customer's reach.

Commitment

When we look closely at what makes or breaks a customer experience, three things come to mind. Does the company care about your needs? What level of quality – whether we're talking about a product or service – does the company provide? What is their customer service reputation? Companies that deliver a Boutique Experience are committed – to their customers, to quality and to service – because they understand that experience extends beyond the initial purchase or contract.

Employee Empowerment

One of the biggest advantages smaller, boutique environments can offer is employees who are empowered to make decisions and solve problems. It's a much more pleasant experience when an employee doesn't have to check with his/her manager, or worse, a committee of managers, in order to meet a customer's needs. Take an employee at a local electronics store versus one at Best Buy or Circuit City – which do you think is more likely to have the authority to negotiate on price, throw in free batteries or offer to order a customized product that will better meet your needs? Before you answer, consider which employee is more concerned about earning your business.

Flexibility

In an environment where customers can take their business elsewhere in a few clicks of a mouse, the customer really is king – no matter how big or small. For businesses, that means being very flexible. One size does not fit all. Standard practices will not work for every client. That is why standard practice for boutique companies is to meet a customer's needs. One of the key phrases in the definition for boutique is "offering customized service." Not just service, but products, solutions, programs, etc. – all customized to meet a customer's specific requirements. This is how boutiques build loyal, lifetime customer relationships. When a company can't deviate from corporate policies and procedures, it will lose customers.

Independence

Being an independent company – not affiliated with a larger corporation or conglomerate – is the primary reason why "boutique" companies are more flexible, more accountable, more accessible, etc. They don't have to answer to another entity. They make their own rules, choose their strategic business partners and avoid the hassles associated with corporate red tape, approvals, policies and procedures. As a result, their customers receive more relevant products and services that meet their needs and a more positive customer experience.

Innovative

This characteristic works in conjunction with employee empowerment and flexibility. If employees are able to make decisions and the business is more flexible when it comes

to meeting a customer's needs, we are more likely to see creative and innovative solutions. Boutique environments are more apt to foster innovation, allowing employees to deviate from the norm.

Personal Attention

Perhaps the biggest differentiator of the Boutique Experience is the personal attention a customer receives. In fact, one could argue that this is the real reason why boutiques and "mom-and-pops" continue to exist. While technology has made it possible to meet basic needs without ever leaving the house, the majority of people still need human contact, particularly individual, one-on-one experiences. Despite its size, Nordstrom's has one of the best customer service reputations in the retail industry. The retail giant has maintained this reputation by continuing to provide personalized attention to each and every shopper in each and every department. When you walk into any Nordstrom's, you feel like you're shopping in a boutique store due to the personal attention you receive.

Responsiveness

A variation on accessibility, being responsive extends beyond returning service calls. It is a measure of how quickly a company reacts to individual questions as well as larger issues such as product or service failures. Returning to the JetBlue example, the airline received kudos for how quickly it responded to its mistakes that left thousands of passengers stranded for an entire weekend. More impressive, however, is Southwest Airlines. It instituted a proactive customer resolution policy that has a goal of making restitution with the customer before the customer reaches the airline after a problem has occurred. That is the higher level of responsiveness consumers deserve but rarely find outside of the boutique experience. When a company takes the time to respond quickly, the customer is more likely to feel important. Although the Boutique Experience (and the characteristics it encompasses) is easier to relate to the retail industry and business-to-consumer market, it is just as important within the business-to-business market and the employer-to-employee environment. For example, as an employee of your company, you expect your strategic business partners to be accountable, accessible, committed, flexible and responsive to your needs. Similarly, your employees expect you to display these same characteristics when they come to you with a need, question or problem.

There is one area in which all three worlds (B2C, B2B and E2E) collide – corporate relocation. Corporate relocation involves myriad administrative functions as well as significant interaction between an HR professional, outside service providers (moving companies, real estate agents, mortgage lenders, etc.) and the transferee. Outsourcing the entire relocation program to a company that offers a Boutique Experience can ensure a positive experience for all parties involved. OneSource Relocation offers a Boutique Experience characterized by quality assurance, company accountability, cost containment and industry-leading technology. Uncompromised dedication to its clients' objectives has made OneSource Relocation the partner of choice for companies of all sizes, including Fortune 500 and those with only occasional relocation needs. Determined to make relocation a hassle-free experience that is beneficial to the transferee, their family and your company, OneSource Relocation offers personalized solutions designed to meet a client's specific needs combined with innovative, customer-centric support. The company has an extremely high performance level that is evident by its 100% client retention rate and its willingness to waive its fees for non-performance.

No matter what you are in the market for – a new house, a new car, a 529 plan or a relocation company – don't settle for less than the Boutique Experience.

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